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UM professor assesses enrollment trends

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IMMEDIATELY

UM PROFESSOR ASSESSES
ENROLLMENT TRENDS

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MISSOULA--

The major factor contributing to enrollment problems at the University of Montana is the declining numbers of Montana freshmen choosing to enroll there, according to Paul Polzin, University of Montana researcher and professor of management.

Writing in the autumn issue of the Montana Business Quarterly, published Sept. 29 by the University's Bureau of Business and Economic Research and School of Business Administration, Polzin assesses enrollment trends at all units of the Montana University System during the years 1971 to 1977.

Overall systemwide student enrollment peaked at 24,863 students in the fall of 1977, up over 5 percent from 1971. UM's total enrollment in those years declined by 533 students. However, at the same time, Montana State University's enrollment increased from 8,113 to 9,802, an increase of 1,689 students.

Classifying student enrollment by class status, Polzin found that the size of MSU's freshman class increased substantially during the years studied, while the number of freshmen attending UM decreased. In addition, Polzin studied the state's county distribution of freshmen enrolling at both campuses. The results show that since 1971 UM lost freshman students from counties west of the Continental Divide, whose freshmen have traditionally enrolled at the Missoula campus.

The other units of the Montana University System--Eastern Montana College, Montana Tech, Northern Montana College and Western Montana College--have experienced similar, but less severe, declines in freshman student enrollment. However, their total enrollments have remained stable.

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Studying enrollment by academic programs offered at all System units, Polzin found that "students in the lower division classes (in which most freshmen enroll) do not seem to gravitate toward any particular campus for programs not offered elsewhere. The same programs grew rapidly or slowly throughout the Montana University System. Other factors appear to be influencing students' choice of which campus to attend."

Using sophisticated statistical procedures, Polzin measured several factors that may influence a student's choice of colleges. His analysis shows that Montana students tend to choose Montana State University over the University of Montana because of the proximity of the Bozeman campus to the state's larger population areas. Another important factor is the ratio of each county's agricultural income to its total income. According to Polzin, "the results indicate that agricultural counties send relatively more freshmen to the University of Montana and Montana State University, but MSU enrolled more of these students than UM. This supports the view that Montana's farm children tend to enroll at MSU."

Polzin also emphasizes that enrollment problems at all colleges and universities are likely to increase in the future because of declining numbers of potential freshmen. Since the largest single age group in the United States was born in 1961 (1960 in Montana), the largest pool of potential freshmen will graduate from high school during the 1977-1980 period. "In the years following, simply maintaining a constant level of enrollment will require that a greater fraction of the high school graduates attend college," Polzin said. He claims that UM's share of University System enrollment may decline further, "but there also may be a decrease in the number of students in the system."

Another method that colleges may use to continue present levels of enrollment is to attract students from other age groups. UM currently leads all units of the Montana University System in enrollment in continuing education programs, which are designed to appeal to students outside the traditional college-age group. However,

continuing education programs were not included in the enrollment figures used by the Board of Regents to determine faculty and staff size at the six System units. Last year, because of its declining enrollment, UM lost many faculty and staff positions.

Polzin cautions that "reversing the recent enrollment trends at the University of Montana will not be a simple job. UM will continue to experience competition for students from other colleges and universities in Montana. At the same time, there will be a decline in number of persons in the college age group."

UM's recruitment policies may help alleviate current problems; last week's fall quarter enrollment figures will be available soon, and University of Montana officials are hopeful that both freshman and overall enrollment will show an increase over that of previous years.

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